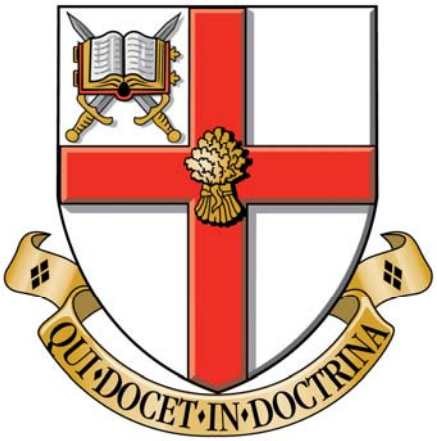

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Medical Advertising in the Wrexham Press, 1855-1906

Lisa Peters

> The patent medicine men became appreciatively bolder in the late nineteenth century. As there were no laws on the books to regulate truth in advertising here was no stopping them once they had gained access to the mass audience created and cultivated by the Victorian periodical press. The larger the audience, the more restive the quacks became. Lacking any precise notion of who it was they were addressing they promised anything and everything to anyone and everyone, vying with one another to see who could produce the most comprehensive cure-all.[1]

Readers of the late Victorian press cannot fail to come cross large numbers of medical advertisements. Brown estimated hat advertising brought in one half of the revenue of Victorian newspapers and consequently, this dependence upon advertisers meant that many newspapers were willing to accept any kind of advertising, including the ubiquitous medical 'puffs'.[2] Medicines claiming to cure all manner of illnesses had long existed but in the Victorian period two names took medical advertising into a new era as their names and products become known throughout the world as a result of the vast sums each spent on advertising. 'Professor' Thomas Holloway began his business in 1838 and by 1842 was spending £5,000 a year on advertising, a sum which rose to £20,000 in 1850[3] £30,000 in 1855[4] and £50,000 in 1883.[5] His pills and ointments made him a millionaire and he was able to create and endow Holloway College (now Royal Holloway College, University of London). His great rival Thomas Beecham commenced his business in St. Helens in the 1850s and also spent vast sums of money on advertising, £120,000 in 1891 alone.[6]

This rise in the number of medical advertisements, fuelled by the large sums devoted to advertising by the medical companies, was reflected in the Wrexham press. Wrexham's first weekly newspaper, the *Wrexham Advertiser* (founded in 1854) saw a steady rise in the number of medical advertisements from an average of three per issue in 1855 to a peak average of thirty-seven per issue in 1880. Numbers began steadily to fall from the 1880s, reaching an average of twelve per issue by 1910. A similar pattern was displayed by the *Wrexham Guardian*, whose average number of medical advertisements per issue

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[1] Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: advertising and spectacle, 1851-1914* (London, 1991), p. 17.
[2] Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford, 1985), p. 17.
[3] E. S. Turner, *The Shocking History of Advertising,* rev. edn. (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 65.
[4] T. R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: a History* (London, 1982), p. 29.
[5] Nevett, *Advertising in Britain,* p. 71.
[6] Nevett, *Advertising in Britain,* p. 71.

rose from seven in 1870 to reach thirty-six ten years later, before falling to fourteen by 1910. Medical advertisements tended make up five to eight per cent of total advertising in the Wrexham press, although at their peak in the 1880s such advertisements made up nearly a fifth of newspaper advertising. Clearly medical notices were an important part of press advertising.

Despite this, medical advertisements, surrounded by their reputation of 'quackery', were often accepted reluctantly. Joseph Corbett went so far as to refuse to accept any 'quack' advertising for the *Porcupine* despite the knowledge that this would cost him £500 a year in advertising revenue.[7] The *Wrexham Telegraph* (established in 1855) may have been addressing medical advertisers when it stated that "all Advertisements of an exceptional nature will be scrupulously excluded" but if so, it quickly had to adjust its moral stance to its financial needs as by 1865 the newspaper contained an average of nine medical advertisements per issue.[8] A particularly high number of medical puffs often earned a newspaper a poor reputation and suggested that a lack of money had forced a reduction in advertising standards. The exceptionally high number of medical advertisements in the *Wrexham Free Press* shortly before it was sold in early 1873 could indicate that financial difficulties were the cause for the sale.

Patent medicine makers were well-known for their hyperbolic and highly unrealistic claims for their products. As Richards commented:

> the first thing that usually strikes one about patent medicine advertising is its indefatigable optimism. No matter what is wrong, it can be set right. Since the advertiser does not know exactly what ails his readers, he makes an effort to canvass every illness imaginable. The long lists of ills cured by pills were epic inventions celebrating the powers of the Promethean pillmaker.[9]

Although some patent medicine producers such as William Rowland of "Rowland's Stomachic Digestive Pills" did state that their medicines could not cure all medical problems,[10] the claims of Kaye's Worsdell's Pills were typical:

> Kaye's Worsdell's Pills - The experience of more than twenty years has proved

[7] Turner, The Shocking History of 'Advertising, p. 50.
[8] *Wrexham Telegraph*, 1 January 1855, p. 1.
[9] Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England,* p. 187.
[10] *Wrexham Free Press*, 2 July 1870, p. 1.

> that they are the most effective remedy ever offered to the public for the cure of diseases arising from the impurity of the blood or impeded circulation of the fluids, as Loss of appetite, Lowness of Spirits, Drowsiness, Heartburn, Flatulency, Acidity of the Stomach, Pain in the Side - Stomach - and Back, Bilious Attacks, Nervous -Periodical and Sick Headaches, Costiveness Indigestion, Rheumatism, Spansnia, Diarheorrea, Eruptions of the Skin, General Debility, Gout, Gravel, Influenza, Piles, Scrofula, Sore Legs, Ulcers, Worms, &c. They operate most beneficially on the viscera, purify the blood and stimulate it into healthy action, remove the obstruction of the stomach, bowels, liver, and other organs of the body, restoring the irregular action to health, and correct such derangements as are the first origins of disease. As a medicine for general family use, KAYE'S WORSDELL'S PILLS are unequalled. Many families have resolved never to be without them, and testimonials to their excellence are continually received.

These pills were available for 1s. 1½d., 2s. 9d, and 4s. 6d., quantities unknown.[11] Such exaggerated claims continued well into the twentieth century despite the Court of Appeal decision in *Carhill v. The Carbolic Smoke Ball Company* [1892]. The Carbolic Smoke Ball Company stated that it could pay £100 to anyone who contracted influenza whilst using their smoke ball. Mrs Carhill sued the company after contracting influenza after using the smoke ball and won her £100. Of the medical advertisements that appeared in the Wrexham press, claims that there were cures for cancer[12] and deafness[13] are clearly ridiculous.

Advertisements for 'alternative' remedies appeared irregularly in the Wrexham press but such products claimed to be able to cure as many medical complaints as their synthetic counterparts. “Kehotah Kidney and Liver Pills” claimed to have been discovered by Kehotak, “the mighty Indian chief and medicine man of the Upper Mississippi Valley”, One large tin of Kehotak's remedy was

> guaranteed to cure any irregularity if the human system, check all discharges and derangements of the Urinary organs, pains in the Back and Loins, Gravel and General Debility, and Loss of Memory of either sex ... the Cure of Diabetes or Bright's Disease, and is a most Powerful Brain and Nerve Tonic.

The advertisement came with a small picture of Kehotak, recognizable by virtue of a feather sticking out of the top of his head. Customers were warned to be wary of imitations, the original product costing four shillings and sixpence.[14] The British Medical

[11] *Wrexham Advertiser*, 7July 1855, p. 1.
[12] *Wrexham Guardian*, 7 December 1900, p. 3.
[13] *Wrexham Advertiser,* 1 December 1900, p. 7.
[14] *Wrexham Guardian,* 1 March 1890, p. 7.

Association condemned these patent medicines in the publications *Secret Remedies* (1909) and *More Secret Remedies* (1912) as a waste of money and sometimes as a danger to the public. In 1914 the Select Committee on Patent Medicines organized an analysis of Fenning's Fever Cure which revealed that the 'cure' was merely a dilute solution of nitric acid and peppermint, costing an estimated halfpenny to create, yet was sold for 1s. 1½.d. for eight fluid ounces.[15] The appearance of medical advertisements such as that for “Rowland's Stomachic Digestive Pills”, which assured readers that they did not contain “a particle of Mercury or any of its preparations” may have caused them to wonder what ingredients other medicines contained.[16]

Supporting these claims of wonder cures was the personal testimonial, where companies produced either a list of those who used their medicine (or people they claimed used it) or a personal endorsement of the product by a named individual. It seems that patent medicine companies vied with each other over who could product the longest lists of aristocrats and royals using their pills. In 1843 the *Edinburgh Review* discovered that “Mr. Cockles Antibilious Pills” were recommended by ten dukes, five marquesses, seventeen earls, eight viscounts, sixteen lords, one archbishop, fifteen bishops, the adjutant-general and the advocate-general.[17] A particularly impressive celebrity testimonial appeared in the *Wrexham Guardian* in 1900 for “Phosferine: The Royal Tonic and Digestive” which was patronized by the Emperor of Russia, the King of Greece, the Queen of Romania, the Dowager Empress of Russia, two Russian Grand Duchesses, a Russian Grand Duke, and the Crown Princess of Romania.[18] It was not only the rich and famous that recommended patent medicines, as testimonials on the wonders of patent medicines from those lower in the social scale appeared in the Wrexham press. In 1906 the *Wrexham Advertiser* carried the tale of Jesse Rosling of Preston who claimed to have been miraculously cured from paralysis by “Dr. Cassell's Fleshing Forming and Strengthening Tablets”, which not only cured his paralysis, but also prevented “premature greyness and delayed the appearance of old age”.[19] Perhaps medical advertisers believed that potential purchasers were more impressed by endorsements from the man in street, rather than the lofty personages of dukes and queens. If so, this concept was further perfected by “Doan's Backache Kidney Pills” who published endorsements in the Wrexham press from various local residents who were

[15] W. Hamish Fraser, The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850-1914 (London, 1981).
[16] *Wrexham Free Press,* 2 July 1870, p. 1.
[17] Abraham Haywood, 'The Advertising System', *Edinburgh Review, 77* (1843), 6. Quoted in Richards, p. 84.
[18] *Wrexham Guardian, 7* December 1900, p. 2.

presumably willing to supply further details on request and act as local example of the effectiveness of the pills. The endorsements were given added local character by news-like headings such as “News Helpful to Wrexham”[20] or “May Help Wrexham People”.[21]

Advertisers often sought to link their products with current affairs and events. Bovril, produced one of the most well-known examples of this advertising method with their famous Boer War advertisement, and the patent medicine producers also sought to associate their products with the war. The makers of one medicine declared that “The Transvaal will destroy life - COLEMAN'S 'wincarnus' preserves it” without telling readers how it would do so.[22] An article published in March 1900, titled “English Actors in South Africa - Disagreeable Experience of Two Artists”, was not in fact a story on the Boer War, but a medical advertisement. The advertisement told the story of an actor, Mr Casson, who became ill in South Africa and the doctors were unable to cure him. In desperation Mrs Casson came across some boxes of “Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People” in their luggage and Mr Casson was soon cured.[23] Advertisements for 'Dr. Williams Pink Pills for Pale People', owned by the Canadian Senator George Taylor Fulford, appeared frequently in the *Wrexham Advertiser* in the early twentieth century. The advertisements were written in the style of a newspaper article reporting a near miraculous recovery from illness. It was not until readers reached the end of the story when “Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People” cured the sufferer that they would have realized that it was an advertisement. The stories could reflect local interests as well as current events. Several such advertisements referred to events in Wales, for example, “Welsh Colliers and the Sliding Scale” began by commenting on the end of the sliding scale before discussing a visit by a reporter from the *Merthyr Express* to Mr Walker of Treharris, which revealed that his daughter, Mary Jane, had been cured of twitching down her right side by “Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People”.[24] This focus of regional interest appeared in another advertisement in the same year, dramatically titled “A Message from Welsh Americans to their Suffering Kinsmen at Home”. A title like this would usually lead the reader to expect an article promoting emigration to the new world, not one urging the 'suffering kinsmen' to use “Veno's Lighting Cough Cure” - as sold in Boot's Cash Chemists in Wrexham”.[25]

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[19] *Wrexham Advertiser,* 15 September 1906, p. 2
[20] *Wrexham Advertiser,* 10 March 1905, p. 4.
[21] *Wrexham Advertiser,* 24 March 1905, p. 4.
[22] *Wrexham Guardian*, 2 March 1900, p. 6.
[23] *Wrexham Advertiser,* 10 March 1900, p. 5.
[24] *Wrexham Advertiser,* 21 June 1902, p. 7.
[25] *Wrexham Advertiser*, 25 January 1902, p. 3.

Medical books, usually available by mail-order, were regularly advertised in the Wrexham press in the 1860s and 1870s. Tides such *as A work on marriage: its duties and impediments*[26] were typical and the qualifications of the author were similar to those of Dr Smith, the author of the Warning Voice who was a "Celebrated Physician for the cure of Nervous Exhaustion, Indigestion, Rheumatism, Dimness of Sight, Functional Disorders, Weakness, Low Spirits, Debility, Spermatorrhea, Impediments to Marriage, and all error".[27] Books and medicines claiming to cure these "diseases from error" were the target of the 1889 Indecent Advertisements Act. The act was aimed at those who the Earl of Meath described as sellers of cures for "a certain class of disease of a nameless character" namely syphilis and similar diseases.[28] In studying the debates on the bill, Turner found it significant that the main objections to the appearance of such advertisements in the press was not that the products themselves were of little use, but the immoral and indecent nature of the advertisements.[29]

The passage of this act did not prevent the continued advertising of immoral and indecent notices, in particular those for abortifacients. Beecham's pills' "Advice to Females" recommended that women suffering "any unusual delay" should take five Beecham's pills a day, the most common cause of any delay being pregnancy.[30] In 1898 the Newspaper Society's solicitor stated in a circular that

> in my view, if it could be proved that a woman obtained the medicine with a view to procure abortion in consequence of reading the advertisement of it in a particular paper, the publisher of that paper would run the serious risk of finding himself indicted for inciting the commission of a felony, or for being accessory to the commission of one, and I believe the judge would find his way to a conviction. Further, I am not sure that these advertisements are not obscene publications, for which a prosecution could be successfully maintained.[31]

However the Wrexham press ignored this warning as it continued to advertise products such as an illustrated book by P. Blanchard on birth control and abortifacients.[32]

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[26] *Wrexham Telegraph,* 4 March 1865, p. 7.
[27] *Wrexham Advertiser,* 3 March 1870, supplement.
[28] Turner, The Shocking History of Advertising, p. 95.
[29] Turner, *The Shocking History of Advertising,* p. 93.
[30] Fraser, The Coming of the Mass Market, p. 140.
[31] Newspaper Society Circular, December 1898. Quoted in Nevett, *Advertising in Britain,* p. 114.
[32] *Wrexham Guardian,* 4 March 1900, p. 6.

As with other types of notices, the visual appearance of medical advertisement altered over time. Medical advertisements initially consisted of lines of small type, across one column, without illustrations, and, in the Wrexham press, often placed at the bottom of a column and therefore making them less visible to the reader. A typical example was one that appeared in the Wrexham Advertiser in 1855 for “Dr de Roos Compound Renal Pills” which was placed in the bottom right corner of the front page and whose small type would have made it difficult for any reader to be attracted to the “most safe and effectious remedy”. Only the most persistent of readers would have read the testimonials and the list of local chemists selling the pills to reach the final sentences of the advertisement which requested “respectable persons in county places” to become sellers of the pills in return for a generous commission.[33] In contrast, by the turn of the century, illustrated advertisements with different sized type and fonts and which crossed columns were regularly seen. “Francis' Cough Medicine” contained a picture of an old woman clutching her shawl and coughing with the phrase “Never Let a Cough Grow Old” placed across columns to draw attention to the product.[34] Some advertisements were less adventurous in their illustrations. The slogan “Have You a Bad Leg?” with a simple picture of a bent leg with a black spot above the ankle was not a particularly attractive method of persuading people to part with two shillings and sixpence for a bottle of “Grasshopper Ointment and Pills”.[35] Other advertisements, such as “Dr. Williams's Pink Pills for Pale People”, as already stated, deliberately disguised their advertisements to make them appear to be newspaper articles.

An examination of the medicine advertising in the Wrexham press is a story of exaggeration, immorality, and the changing nature of newspaper advertising. Patent medicine advertisements were notorious for their exaggeration and the confidence that their pills and ointments could cure any and every illness. Dr. J. Lewis of Leeds was not the only medical advertiser to claim such confidence in his skills as to guarantee a cure if he undertook the commission.[36] Perhaps the advertisers subscribed to the view that “the great mass of people ... will more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a small one”.[37] Not even the intervention of the law could prevent the patent medicine products from

[33] Wrexham Guardian, 7 July 1855, p. 1.
[34] *Wrexham Advertiser,* 1 December 1906, p. 4.
[35] *Wrexham Advertiser,* 15 September 1906, p. 2.
[36] *Wrexham Free Press, 2* July 1870, p. 1
[37] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (1925). Quoted from *The Columbia World of Quotations* at http://www.bartleby.com/66

continuing to publish their outlandish claims. Patent medicine makers made fortunes from their pills and ointments and were probably richer than many of the aristocrats and royals who endorsed their products. Despite the aura of immorality that hung over it, the Victorian and Edwardian advertising world would have been far less interesting without the puffs of the quacks.